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7 November 1962

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE NSC EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

From: Paul H. Nitze

A suggested course of action re the contingency one of our surveillance planes is shot at or destroyed.

1. Time permitting we should lay an appropriate base of public understanding of the current situation as a foundation for future action. As soon as we have confirmation that the ships carrying Soviet missiles have actually departed Cuban waters, the public should be informed that the Soviets have carried out only a portion of their obligations pursuant to the Kennedy-Khrushchev exchange of letters and that they have given no indication as yet of intending to fulfill other essential portions of those commitments. Specifically, they have refused to acknowledge that IL-28's are weapons systems "capable of offensive use". They have not made it possible for the UN effectively to verify the dismantling and removal of all weapons systems in Cuba capable of offensive use, and have concurrently denied the legitimacy of U.S. surveillance in the absence of effective UN verification. Together with the Cuban regime, they appear to be frustrating the development of effective safeguards against the reintroduction of offensive weapons systems. Until we have evidence of a definite program in resolving these three issues, the U.S. in its own defense and in the defense of the security of the Hemisphere must take those steps called for by elemental prudence, including a continuance of aerial surveillance.
2. In the event one of our surveillance planes is shot at or destroyed, we should first establish the facts beyond any reasonable doubt.
3. We should then communicate to the Russians, reiterate our understanding of the original exchange of commitments, cite the history of our warnings to them with respect to interference with surveillance, and inform them that, unless they will give us prompt and specific assurances that our planes will not be interfered with, we will have to take appropriate measures to protect our surveillance flights and reimpose and extend the quarantine.
4. Simultaneously we would announce to the public that one of our planes had been shot at or destroyed and indicate the nature of the position we were communicating to the Soviet Union.
5. After the elapse of sufficient time for the message to the Soviet Union to have reached Moscow and for them to have instructed their people in Cuba, we should resume surveillance flights.

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6. If it becomes necessary to act to defend our surveillance planes, the specific action taken would depend upon the circumstances of the interference. If a U-2 has been shot down, the appropriate action would be first to eliminate the particular SAM site or sites responsible for the action, then to communicate a second time with Moscow, and finally, in the absence of satisfactory assurances, eliminate the remainder of the SAM system. If MIGs are involved in an isolated incident, the appropriate action would be against MIGs whether in the air or on airfields. If short-range anti-aircraft were responsible, this would presumably be action by Cubans not Russians, and action directly against those positions would be appropriate.

7. After evaluation of U.S.S.R. and Cuban counter-action to our actions under Paragraph 6 above, the quarantine could be reimposed and extended to include POL, at least until such time as we receive satisfaction that the removal of the IL-28's and the security of our surveillance pending adequate and continuing safeguards have been assured.

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The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited

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The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited: An International Collection of Documents, from the Bay of Pigs to the Brink of Nuclear War

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